

REPORT OF INVESTIGATION



File Number:	03-019
Agency:	Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Basis for Investigation:	Commissioner Lonice Barrett request
Allegations:	Promotion Process and Internal Investigations
Date Opened:	March 10, 2003
Investigated By:	Michael M. Eason Deputy Inspector General
Date of Report:	December 23, 2003

OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

File Number: 03-019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) initiated an inquiry into actions of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) concerning promotion practices and an internal investigation into an incident involving DNR Personnel. The complaint was initiated by DNR Commissioner Lonice Barrett. The OIG began a series of meetings with the Commissioner and his staff to address various policies and procedures of the department.

The review of the promotion process resulted in DNR working extensively with the University of Georgia to develop a new promotion process utilizing an assessment center, eventually to be staffed by non-DNR personnel. The DNR has implemented the new practices designed to remove perceptions of bias or favoritism in the promotion process.

The internal investigation process used in the matter concerning several senior rangers in 2000 was reviewed by DNR. The policy concerning internal investigations was changed to require more documentation of the actions of investigators and to require all investigations be conducted with these guidelines.

The Department of Natural Resources and Commissioner Barrett worked closely with the OIG to revise and update many issues arising from this complaint. The DNR Commissioner and his staff were extremely responsive to OIG input and sought OIG participation throughout these policy decisions.



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OFFICE OF THE STATE INSPECTOR GENERAL

FILE 03-019

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

“PROMOTIONS AND INTERNAL INVESTIGATIONS”

SUMMARY OF ACTIONS

- 1) **Basis for Investigation** - The Office of the Inspector General, (OIG) initiated a review into the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) based on a meeting with Commissioner Lonice Barrett. Commissioner Barrett advised that his department had been the subject of local television, “Investigative Reports” concerning their law enforcement promotion process and the conduct of an internal investigation conducted by DNR.
- 2) **Action Taken** - The Office of the Inspector General initiated a file pertaining to the promotion of a Law Enforcement Sergeant and the DNR internal investigation conducted on senior law enforcement staff. The Inspector General requested that the DNR conduct a review of their policies and actions in these matters. The OIG agreed to participate in the review of the issues.

As a part of this inquiry the OIG reviewed the policies of the DNR on promotions and internal investigations. The reports of the internal inquiries conducted by senior staff within the Wildlife Resources Division of DNR were examined.

The DNR Macon Incident Summary of the conduct of the law enforcement supervisors while attending a conference was reviewed. The purpose was to review the actions of DNR in the conduct of the internal investigation. The initial anonymous telephone complaint and a subsequent anonymous written complaint appear to have come from the same source. The summary did not provide sufficient detail and specificity to describe a thorough and complete investigation. The report of investigation was reviewed by a private investigator hired by the television station and was reported by the media to be inadequate in its findings. The OIG reviewed the file and also noted that the DNR investigative file had failed to specifically document the actions taken during their inquiry into the matter. Noted in this file, were the letters of notice sent to all identified supervisors reinforcing to them the DNR Standards of Conduct and an outline of the issues reviewed.

The Pirkle Promotion Incident Summary was reviewed by the OIG. The report which was completed by senior staff resulted in the suspension without pay for 5 days of a senior staff member of the Law Enforcement Section. This supervisor subsequently was reduced in grade and transferred to another work unit of DNR. The findings in this inquiry led the Commissioner to elect to completely revise the law enforcement promotion process. The Commissioner selected the assessment center process which is used by several other state law enforcement agencies including the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Public Safety.

Extensive effort was put into new and updated policies including several reviews by the OIG staff in concert with the Commissioner and the Personnel Director. DNR circulated the proposed policy changes among its senior staff and input was sought from outside subject matter experts.

3) Discussion

a) The Promotion Process - A review of the promotion process resulted in DNR working extensively with the University of Georgia to develop a new promotion process utilizing an assessment center, eventually to be staffed by non-DNR personnel. The DNR has implemented the new practices designed to remove perceptions of bias or favoritism in the promotion process. This process will initially be implemented by the use of a modified assessment board using internal personnel to accomplish the assessment due to current budget issues.

b) The Internal Investigative Process - The internal investigation process used in the matter concerning several senior rangers in 2000 was reviewed by the OIG and DNR. The policy concerning internal investigations was changed to require more documentation of the actions of investigators and to require all investigations be conducted by these guidelines. In concert with this policy change it was determined by the Commissioner that several policies, pertaining to employee conduct needed to be updated and this was accomplished by the Department of Natural Resources.

4) Conclusion – The Department of Natural Resources acted promptly to address the concerns raised by the media on two separate issues. Both issues were addressed internally by the Department and problems with policies and actions of employees were identified and corrective action was taken by the department. The department will continue to review and update its policies and procedures and to ensure employee awareness on at least an annual basis.

5) Recommendations –

Agency Specific

- a)** The adoption of the assessment center procedure as a fair and impartial process for promotions within an agency is critical to continue to improve the operation of any organization. An assessment center staffed by independent outside professionals removes perceived political influence and provides a fair and equitable merit process for the selection of candidates for promotion.
- b)** The Department of Natural Resources should seek funding for the implementation of the proposed assessment center which will be staffed by external professionals.
- c)** The methods and documentation used for internal investigations into allegations of employee misconduct within state agencies is critical. The Department of Natural Resources must continue to maintain the highest standards in this area. Their new policy will allow them to ensure they use a professional and valid process.

Statewide Issues

- a)** Each agency in state government should ensure that proper procedures are in place concerning the conduct of internal investigations of employees and operations. Having a well defined policy with accurate and complete documentation will ensure both the citizens and employees that proper steps are being taken to investigate allegations of misconduct in state government.
- b)** A process for the routine review and updating of all policies needs to be implemented by every state agency. Additionally a system to insure employee awareness with all policies on an annual basis is needed.
- c)** The investigation by state agencies into allegations of employee misconduct or departmental wrongdoing should be conducted by professional investigators with proper skills and knowledge.
- d)** Every state agency should review and validate their promotion processes to ensure that promotions are made based on valid and properly documented job skills, knowledge and experience.
- e)** Agencies should ensure that employees know what promotion requirements are and be able to compete fairly for promotions. This understanding will help to enhance the organization and their commitment to the highest level of performance as state employees.